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Discovering Opportunity through Oppression

There exists an ancient Chinese proverb that "Women hold up half the sky." While men hold up the other half of the sky, this proverb expresses the equality of the genders in the development of the world. The people of the world today go day in and day out happily counting their blessings, with a blind eye to the horrors that exist in their own backyards. One of the most horrific social conflicts of the world is human trafficking, also known as sex trafficking. "Sex trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act is under the age of 18 years" ("The Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking: Fact Sheet: Sex Trafficking."). This appalling situation has risen from a condition called gendercide, which describes how millions of women die worldwide because of their inability to access the same food and health care that is accessible to males. This gender inequality has resulted in the oppression and deaths of many young women and girls. Throughout their lives, generations have learned of the terrible events of the world's history. It is a past ridden with oppression of races, like Africans and Jewish people, but it has never been ridden with oppression of a race as universal and widespread as women. The world recognizes past slavery but refuses to believe that it still exists in the world; refuses to believe that there are people of the human race that face a hell of modern day slavery. If there was such a revolution to liberate African slaves, and to liberate Jews from oppression, why is there a lack of motivation to free these modern day slaves?

Do people not consider these oppressed women as slaves? "These are human beings who are owned by someone else, who lack the ability to walk away, who lack the ability to make a decision in their own self-interest to do something else...If that's not slavery, I don't know what is" ("Teen Girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S. - ABC News."). Sexual slavery, along with honor killings and genital cutting, may seem surreal and foreign to many Western cultures; much like African slavery was viewed. It is difficult to imagine a culture that would treat women in such a way, but, "Paradoxically, it is the countries with the most straitlaced and sexually conservative societies, such as India, Pakistan, and Iran that have disproportionately large numbers of forced prostitutes" (Kristof and WuDunn 6). We assume this treatment is inevitable since it is not occurring in our own homes, but the fact is sexual slavery is widely spread throughout the United States as well, not simply in developing countries. If labor slavery was outlawed because of the inequality of man, sex slavery should be outlawed because of the inequality of genders. Violence against women has escalated as women have become oppressed by sex trafficking. Through exposure of this social issue and an increased reform of education and microfinance, women's oppression can be transformed into opportunity in order to take advantage of women's full potential.

How did a world that was making such progress regress to such an extent? Nicholas Kristof, the co-author of "Half the Sky" states in an interview that, "Traditionally, what mattered in many agricultural societies was physical strength, and men tended to have more of that. In addition, conservative sexual mores and taboos about menstruation sometimes led women to be further cloistered, which eroded the ability of women to contribute to the family and thus devalued them further" ("Author Nicholas Kristof Seeks Better World for Women"). It is simple for the detached public to blame the girls for assumed naivety but often girls are lured into

prostitution by offers of better jobs, money, clothing, or modeling. This is especially evident in developing countries as the young women feel they are obligated to help their family by getting jobs at a young age. This hope for a great job urges the young girls to move away from their families, but, the family never sees their girl again; she is kidnapped and sold into a brothel.

However, not all families are without fault as many girls also enter the trafficking industry due to their parents. "I've seen mothers haggle with agents over the price of their daughters"

(Abouzeid). The concern arises of how women are kept in this situation for such a long period of time. The fact is that fighting back a kidnapper will not elicit an opportunity for escape. These girls are often conditioned to stay with their captors. "Sex traffickers use a variety of methods to "condition" their victims including starvation, confinement, beatings, physical abuse, rape, gang rape, threats of violence to the victims and the victims' families, forced drug use and the threat of shaming their victims by revealing their activities to their family and their families' friends"

("The Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking: Fact Sheet: Sex Trafficking."). Some oppressors even take conditioning to the point of threatening the girls that their family will take future abuse if they do not comply. These lies infuse fear in the girls, making them susceptible to further lies and abuse. The captor's motive is to break down the girls to such a degree that the brothel owners or kidnappers do not have to worry about the girls escaping. "She was subject to various abuses while in there... This is all part of the breaking down period where [he] gains complete control of this girl" ("Teen Girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S. - ABC News."). While this travesty is prominent in the East, Western culture is not free of human trafficking. "The FBI estimates that well over 100,000 children and young women are trafficked in America today. They range from 9 to 19, with the average age being 11" ("Teen Girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S. - ABC News."). According to Jody Raphael (a

senior research fellow at the Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family Law Center at DePaul College of Law in Chicago), Chicago alone is estimated to have approximately 16,000 women and girls prostituted.

The only way to jump-start a solution for this travesty is to become educated by hearing about the issue first hand. Meena was a former prostitute who thought that was all she could aspire to in life. She was treated poorly for years as a young girl in a brothel and one rainy night decided to make an escape. She did not care whether she died or not; dying might have been better than her current situation. She had two children in that brothel and worked for over 10 years after her escape to get her children back. The children were beaten, trafficked, and told by the brothel owners that Meena was not their real mother. The young boy only stopped believing the brothel owner after witnessing so many of his sister's beatings and rapes. After months of Meena pleading outside of the brothel, and many threats, the young Vivek ran away and went to his true mother. Together they worked at also rescuing Meena's daughter, Naina. Conversely, rebellion did not always lead to such promising results. "Long Pross was thirteen when she was kidnapped and sold to a brothel in Cambodia. When she rebelled, the female brothel owner punished her by gouging out her eye with a metal rod" (Kristof and WuDunn 11).

While both women lived in the East, stories of forced prostitution have circulated throughout the United States as well. Debbie (whose name was changed for publication) was taken from her own driveway and shoved into a car by a threatened friend. After being gang raped repeatedly while being sold as an escort for more than 40 days and kept in a dog cage, Debbie was finally found. "So on Nov. 8, police broke down the doors to the same apartment and realized with a shock why they'd been unable to find Debbie – she was there, but she was tied up and crushed into a drawer under a bed" ("Teen Girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S. - ABC

News."). Another girl, Miya, was approached while working at the mall by an attractive couple offering to promote her as a model, but instead trafficked her as an escort in California. She was able to escape after six brutal days of being forced to have sex with a countless number of men paying for her. Refusing to relate to human trafficking because many believe it is not happening in their country is not an excuse anymore. Though not as publicized, human trafficking occurs globally no matter what country or government.

It has been concluded by the 2008 U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons report that Iraq has not been combating the crime of sex trafficking. Baghdad has not been of much help either. "Baghdad, the report says, 'offers no protection services to victims of trafficking, reported no efforts to prevent trafficking in persons and does not acknowledge trafficking to be a problem in the country' (Abouzeid). It is disappointing to see a country that was so progressive and holds a traditional Arab society that believes in the value of female virginity to have regressed on women's rights to such a degree. Baghdad's Minister of Women's Affairs resigned in February of 2009 due to a lack of resources provided to her. "Yet even al-Samarraie [former Minister of Women's Affairs] doesn't think sex-trafficking is an issue. 'It's limited,' she said, adding that she believed the girls involved choose to engage in prostitution" (Abouzeid). If a woman who is supposed to be looking out for the welfare of women in the country does not even believe in the crimes being committed, how can a reform begin to occur? "To date [in March of 2009], the government has not prosecuted any traffickers [in Baghdad]." (Abouzeid).

While the future looks dim, there is a solution to this social atrocity. Many organizations have committed to helping oppressed women and it has been concluded that a reform can be made through education and microfinance. However, even with this hope for change, the authorities have been taking a different approach to dealing with the trafficking. The police have

turned to arresting the women prostitutes themselves, instead of the people who trafficked them and forced them into the industry. Our efforts would be better spent providing opportunities for trafficked women than putting prostituted women in jail. The United States and the rest of the world needs to realize that the prostitutes are not the real criminals on the streets. While many prostitutes are arrested, their traffickers are going free. "Between 2003 and 2005, 65 percent of prostitution-related arrests [in the city of Chicago] were of the women being prostituted; less than 1 percent of arrests were of traffickers and pimps" (Goswami and Ream).

The true solution to sex trafficking is primarily the reform of education in society. Education gives young women more opportunities for better jobs and a better life and is not only beneficial for the oppressed, but is beneficial for those just learning of the social issue. "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world," Lawrence Summers wrote. "The question is not whether countries can afford this investment, but whether countries can afford not to educate more girls" (Kristof and WuDunn xx). In "Half the Sky", The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states, "Women's empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduce infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chances of education for the next generation."

Concerns about terrorism after the 9/11 attacks triggered interest in these issues in an unlikely constituency: the military and counterterrorism agencies. Some security experts noted that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately those where women are marginalized. The reason there are so many Muslim terrorists, they argued, has little to do with the Koran but a great deal to do with the lack of robust female participation in Islamic countries. As the

Pentagon gained a deeper understanding of counterterrorism, it became increasingly interested in grassroots projects such as girls' education. (Kristof and WuDunn xxi)

As told in the novel "Half the Sky," one group of children is making a real effort to make their impact on the reform. The principal of the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington, Frank Grijalva, helped sponsor a school in Cambodia to emphasize to his students the importance of public service. "The school was built in Pailin, a Cambodian town on the Thai border that is notorious for cheap brothels that cater to Thai men" (Kristof and WuDunn 19). The children from Washington traveled to Cambodia for a week to help with the setup of the new Overlake School in Pailin. The sponsors even arranged for an internet connection to be set up so the children in Cambodia could communicate with the children back in America. This school gives children in underprivileged towns the opportunity to become educated and therefore make a better life for themselves, instead of turning to the prostitution industry. The benefits of this project are not only reaped by children in Cambodia, but also reaped by the children in America. Natalie Hammerquist regularly e-mails two Cambodian students after going to Cambodia herself. After the inspirational experience, Natalie plans on "a career empowering young people around the world" (Kristof and WuDunn 21).

The second revolutionary idea contributing to freeing oppressed women is improving financing. Kristof and WuDunn, the authors of "Half the Sky" stress the importance of micro-financing, the movement in providing the poorest families with access to financial services in hopes to elevate these families out of poverty. With micro-finance, people in developing countries have the opportunities to grow financial stability and have fewer motives to turn to prostitution. This reform's benefits are ten-fold for society as well, not just the oppressed women.

Empowering women tends to lead to faster economic growth, which in turn tends to undermine extremism and reduce civil conflict. In addition, there's some evidence that countries that marginalize women tend to be more likely to have the macho values of a boy's locker room or an armed camp and are more prone to violence. Bringing women into the picture tends to result in more security.

("Author Nicholas Kristof Seeks Better World for Women")

These reforms can only occur with the support of the free men and women throughout the world. Many organizations have formed to fight human trafficking and arrange plans for aiding victims. Once a victim of trafficking is identified, they can receive many benefits from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Non-U.S. citizens can then "receive Federally funded benefits and services to the same extent as a refugee" ("The Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking: Fact Sheet: Sex Trafficking."). Some of these organizations include: Apne Aap (battling sex slavery in India), American Assistance for Cambodia, Campaign for Female Education, Equality Now, Global Grassroots, International Women's Health Coalition, Women's Learning Partnership, and Women's World Banking (which supports microfinance). Many governments are showing their final recognition by moving to enact laws to protect women. "Enactment of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) made sex trafficking a serious violation of Federal law" ("The Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking: Fact Sheet: Sex Trafficking. ").

Though the majority of the population does not have the resources to create an organization or enact a law, there is still a way to make a difference in millions of women's lives. Joining one of the many aid groups will demonstrate the populations support and urge authorities to better monitor developing countries. Countries need to branch out and support the other

countries of the world, while focusing on the problem in their own country. With an increased recognition of human trafficking and reforms in education and micro financing, millions of young girls can be spared from being torn from their families and forced into a lifetime of slavery. If women deserve such respect in some parts of the world, they deserve such respect in all parts of the world.

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